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Latest release

Australian Statistics Advisory Council - Annual Report

Outlines the functions and activities of the Australian Statistics Advisory Council during 2022-23

Reference period: 01 Jul 2022 - 30 Jun 2023

19/10/2023

Acknowledgement of Country and Copyright information

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Letter of transmittal

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The Hon Dr Andrew Leigh MP
Assistant Minister for Competition, Charities and Treasury
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Minister

I am pleased to submit the Australian Statistics Advisory Council's annual report for the year ending 30 June 2023.

The report outlines the work and activities of the Council and is submitted to you for presentation to Parliament under subsection 24(1) of the Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975.

The Annual Report is dated on the day I approved the text for printing.

Yours sincerely



Professor Ian Harper AO

Chairperson

25 September 2023

Foreword

Foreword



ASAC Chairperson, Professor Ian Harper AO

The Australian Statistics Advisory Council (ASAC, the Council) has a key role in assisting the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) to enhance its effectiveness as a public institution. The ABS is Australia's national statistical agency and the ABS' purpose is to inform Australia's important decisions by delivering relevant, trusted and objective data, statistics and insights.

Better decisions based on better data make for improvement in the welfare of all Australians.

The Council advises the ABS and its Minister on improving Australia's statistical services and draws together perspectives from State and Territory governments, public sector agencies and representatives of private industry and academia. This assists the ABS to set priorities among the competing demands for its services, and to ensure that its decisions are accountable to major users of public data.

The Council met three times during 2022-23. The Council's meetings helped to build a mutual understanding of challenges faced around Australia and in different sectors of the economy, and the role of statistics in addressing them.

This annual report summarises ASAC's activities over the past year and identifies future areas of focus. I thank Council

members for their active engagement with the business of the Council at each meeting. On behalf of the Council, I would also like to thank members of the ASAC Secretariat for their logistical and technical support of the Council's affairs.

Professor Ian Harper AO
Chairperson

Chapter 1: About ASAC

Legislation

The Australian Bureau of Statistics Act 1975 (the ABS Act) establishes the Australian Statistics Advisory Council (ASAC, the Council) to advise the Minister and the Australian Statistician on Australia's statistical services and statistical priorities.

Purpose

To contribute to the effective development of Australia's statistical assets, by providing the Minister and the Australian Statistician with independent, relevant, and timely advice on national priorities.

Role

ASAC contributes to ABS decision-making on statistical priorities and helps inform its assessment of risks and development of strategies. ASAC also advocates for a national statistical system that is adequately resourced and effectively managed.

The Minister and the Australian Statistician may seek advice from the Council on statistical matters.

Operations of the Council

The Council consists of a part-time Chairperson, the Australian Statistician (ex officio), and between ten and twenty-two part-time members. The Council includes a representative from each State and Territory nominated by the Premier or Chief Minister, and representatives from academia, business and community sectors.

The Minister appoints the Council Chairperson for five years and members for up to three years. Members are eligible for reappointment when their terms expire. Appendix 1 lists the names and positions of members as at 30 June 2023.

The Council typically meets three times a year in Canberra, Melbourne and Sydney by rotation. The Council may also interact out of session on any specific matters requiring its attention.

The Chairperson receives an annual fee as set by the Remuneration Tribunal. Other Council Members do not receive any fees but may receive a prescribed travel allowance to support their attendance at meetings.

Costs associated with the operations of ASAC are met from the ABS budget, and secretariat services are provided by ABS staff. Council secretariat services include:

- arranging and supporting meetings
- administering ASAC activities and membership
- assisting with preparation of its Annual Report
- drafting submissions, correspondence or papers issued under the authority of the Council or the Chairperson.

Chapter 2: Year in review: 2022–23

Responsible Minister

During 2022–23, the Minister responsible for the ABS and ASAC was the Hon Dr Andrew Leigh MP, Assistant Minister for Competition, Charities and Treasury.

Delivery against 2022–23 Priorities

The ASAC Annual Report 2021–22 articulated the priorities for 2022–23 as:

1. Advise on the ABS work program under resource constraints.
2. Assist in clarifying ABS roles and responsibilities within an evolving data landscape.
3. Assist in building and maintaining community trust.

4. Advise on opportunities.
5. Monitor and advise on the 2026 Census program.

The Council held three meetings during 2022–23: in August 2022, December 2022, and March 2023 (see Appendix 2 for meeting agendas).

1. Advise on ABS work program

At each ASAC Meeting, the Council received reports from the Australian Statistician on relevant ABS business. During 2022–23, the Australian Statistician reported the ABS had resumed a broad range of statistical operations post the pandemic and continued to modernise its statistical business which requires planning, consultation, and effective management.

At the August meeting, the Council considered Business Dynamism. This provides insights into business vulnerability, viability and structural changes. The Council noted the benefits to understanding supply chain interdependencies, and the role of small business in driving innovation and competition. The Council also noted the benefits of statistics on Business Dynamism to understand the evolving economy, including its resilience to economic shocks and natural disasters.

The Council advocated for a standardised measure of business size, reductions in the burden on small businesses, and greater utilisation of private sector datasets.

At the March meeting, the Council noted ABS statistics have continued to provide robust fit-for-purpose measures of the economy during a period of real-world changes and shocks, including the pandemic, trade disputes, volatile prices, and supply chain disruptions. However, the Council noted the range of challenges facing the ABS, including declining survey response rates, rising costs of modern, cloud-based technologies and increasing complexities in acquiring private sector data which all affect the timely production of economic statistics.

The Council commended the ABS on the development of new indicators of economic activity: Monthly Turnover Indicator; Monthly Household Spending Indicator; Monthly Consumer Price Index Indicator and Monthly Employee Earnings Indicator. The Council advocated for the need for indicators at the State and Territory level to deliver improved insights.

The Council noted the ABS intends to replace the Retail Business Survey with the Monthly Spending Indicator as the headline short-term indicator of household consumption. The Council recommended significant engagement with users of the Retail Business Survey prior to the survey ceasing in June 2025.

2. Assist in clarifying ABS roles and responsibilities within an evolving data landscape

The Council received regular updates on the progress of the Australian Public Service (APS) Data Professional Stream which was established to improve the data capability of the workforce by sourcing, growing and mobilising data expertise across the APS. Dr Gruen was appointed as the inaugural Head of the Data Profession in September 2020.

At the August meeting, the Council noted the ABS continues to be affected by the scarcity of skills across the data, digital and technology landscape. Strong demand for data and digital skills from across the public service, state and territory governments and the private sector is contributing to higher staff attrition rates in some parts of the ABS and lower numbers of skilled applicants, both constraints on the ABS' ability to deliver its ambitious work program.

At the March meeting, the Council noted the current state of data sharing between the Commonwealth and States and Territories. The Council considered the opportunities, current challenges, potential solutions, and the long-term goals for data sharing between the Commonwealth and States and Territories. While progress had been made, the Council agreed there is some way to go to realise the full data sharing vision and to fully enable the effective use of data.

The Council noted that, in July 2021, National Cabinet signed an Intergovernmental Agreement on Data Sharing, which commits all jurisdictions to share data by default where it is safe, lawful and ethical to do so. The Council noted the growing range of projects that are safely sharing Commonwealth and state data.

Council Members considered the design and operations of the Data Availability and Transparency Act 2022 Scheme, as well as the incentives and risks public officials face when making decisions on data sharing and access. The Council supported the scheme as a systematic approach to safely sharing data and enabling more value to be realised.

3. Assist in building and maintaining community trust

At the August meeting, the Council noted ABS' work on privacy and social licence – building trust with private sector providers and expanding privacy management activities. The Council noted the ABS undertakes formal privacy impact assessments when it plans to change its handling of personal information.

The Council considered the potential and challenges of acquiring and using private sector data for statistical purposes. While the Council agreed with ABS' strategy for greater use of private sector data, the Council noted the incompleteness of banking data in covering the population, competition from private sector companies (i.e. data houses) and the costs and risks of acquiring these large data sets.

At the December meeting, the Council considered the high-profile data breaches reported throughout 2022 and noted that people who have been affected by the recent data breaches are less likely to share personal information and participate in surveys. Council members advised that businesses, government and academia are all experiencing greater reluctance from people to share personal information.

4. Advise on opportunities

The Council noted the ABS is exploring new avenues for government agencies to securely access and analyse private sector data with consent from within a data supplier's operating environment. Additionally, the Council noted the ABS had conferred with Commonwealth departments and agencies to share experiences, challenges, and priorities for the use of private sector data.

To maintain privacy and social licence, the Council recommended the ABS continue to build trust with private sector providers, expand the work program on privacy management, and undertake privacy impact assessments. While there are challenges in acquiring and using private sector data for statistical purposes, the Council supported ABS' directions in making greater use of data from the private sector to meet the needs of policy and decision makers.

The Council advised the ABS on emerging statistical challenges and opportunities across the jurisdictions and sectors represented. The Council advocated for the following additional priorities:

- increased frequency and detail of statistics reported by State and Territory, including quarterly Gross State Product data, labour force statistics and business insights
- assistance from the ABS to better understand population movements
- more detailed statistics capturing changes in the housing market and other cost of living pressures.

During 2022–23 the Council also found it valuable to consider papers submitted jointly with ABS (the Business Council of Australia and the Department of Finance) and independent of the ABS (Melbourne Institute: Applied Economic & Social Research at University of Melbourne).

5. Monitor and advise on the 2026 Census program

At the August meeting, the Council noted the 2021 Census Program had finalised all data capture, processing and coding activities and had released the first set of Census data. The Council noted the 2021 Census Program would soon release the second and third Census datasets, and present public data seminars and targeted stakeholder briefings.

The Council congratulated the ABS for the successful delivery and dissemination of the 2021 Census during the pandemic. The Council expressed gratitude to ABS strategic partnership managers in helping State and Territory members interpret Census data and obtain insights.

At the December meeting, the Council noted the ABS has commenced a dual track approach as part of the 2026 Census Program, with the larger track focussed on the delivery of the Census in 2026 and a second, much smaller, set of work on the future design and transformation of Australian Censuses with a 2031 and beyond horizon.

At the March meeting, the Council noted the ABS had begun a broad public consultation process on the topics and questions for the 2026 Census. The Council considered the development of 2026 Census topics and questions. Council members noted that the ABS will make a recommendation to the Government on the topics for the next Census and that the final decision on 2026 Census topics will be made by the Government.

Chapter 3: Looking forward: 2023–24 ASAC Statement of

Intent

Purpose and Role of ASAC

The legislation, purpose, and role of ASAC will remain unchanged from 2022–23.

In line with its legislated functions, ASAC will continue to represent government and community interests by advising the Minister and the Australian Statistician on Australia's current and longer-term statistical priorities and ABS' strategies to deliver on them.

As an advisory forum with broad membership and understanding of developments in the wider environment, ASAC will:

- advise the Minister and the ABS as appropriate in relation to ABS functions
- provide input into the strategic directions, risks, priorities and key deliverables of the ABS
- advocate for an effective national statistical system and support the ABS' role within it
- report annually to the Parliament.

To help the ABS respond to issues and plan, ASAC will:

- provide the ABS with frank advice and feedback
- draw on the expertise of ASAC members and seek input from stakeholders
- help identify risks and raise potential issues
- provide guidance where needed to ensure the ABS remains a trusted and relevant data provider.

The Chairperson of ASAC will convey advice to the Minister as appropriate and report back to the Council.

Priorities for 2023–24

The priorities for the Council remain unchanged for 2023–24:

- Advise on the ABS work program under resource constraints to ensure the ongoing needs of government and stakeholders for quality data can be met in a timely, efficient, and effective manner.
- Assist in clarifying ABS roles and responsibilities within an evolving data landscape, including in data integration and access, strengthening data security, and in the promotion of an effective national statistical system.
- Assist in building and maintaining community trust, including through supporting ABS activities, identifying potential reputational risks and advising on stakeholder engagement.
- Advise on opportunities to enhance statistical capabilities across the public sector and beyond.
- Monitor and advise on the 2026 Census program in light of lessons from the 2021 Census including potential innovations in the conduct of the Census, and longer-term possibilities for the Census.

2023–24 proposed activities

The Council will meet three times in 2023–24: July 2023 (Sydney), November 2023 (Canberra) and March 2024 (Melbourne).

Appendix 1: Membership of ASAC as at 30 June 2022

Member	Date first appointed	Meetings attended during 2022-23
Prof Ian Harper AO Dean and Director of the Melbourne Business School & Co-Dean of the Faculty of Business and Economics The University of Melbourne	28 February 2022	3
Dr David Gruen AO Australian Statistician (ex officio) Australian Bureau of Statistics	11 December 2019	3
Prof Lisa Jackson Pulver AM Deputy Vice Chancellor The University of Sydney	8 April 2013	2
Dr Luci Ellis Assistant Governor (Economics) Reserve Bank of Australia	2 November 2015	3
Mr Luke Yeaman Deputy Secretary, Macroeconomic Group Department of the Treasury	4 November 2020	1
Mr Stephen Walters Chief Economist Business Council Australia	2 November 2015	2
Prof Abigail Payne Director and Ronald Henderson Professor University of Melbourne	30 April 2018	2
Ms Gayle Milnes National Data Commissioner Office of the National Data Commissioner	12 October 2022	2
Ms Melinda Cilento Chief Executive Committee for Economic Development of Australia	12 October 2022	1
Prof Robert Breunig Director, Tax and Transfer Policy Institute Chair of Tax Policy and Public Finance Professor of Economics, Crawford School of Public Policy, Australian National University	12 October 2022	1
Prof Nicholas Biddle Professor of Economic and Public Policy Associate Director, ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods, Australian National University	20 January 2023	2

State/Territory Representatives	Date first appointed	Meetings attended during 2022-23
Ms Joann Wilkie Deputy Secretary for the Economic Strategy & Productivity Group New South Wales Treasury	12 November 2022	3
Mr Chris Barrett Deputy Secretary, Economic Division Department of Treasury and Finance, Victoria	3 May 2021	3
Mr Antony Skinner Government Statistician Queensland Treasury	8 April 2013	3
Mr Alistair Jones Executive Director, Economic Business Unit Department of Treasury, Western Australia	31 October 2018	3
Ms Fiona Calvert Deputy Secretary, Economic and Financial Policy Division Department of Treasury and Finance, Tasmania	5 August 2020	2
Mr Mick Butler Deputy Under Treasurer Department of Treasury and Finance, Northern Territory	3 May 2021	3
Mr Stephen Miners Deputy Under Treasurer, Chief Minister Treasury and Economic Development Directorate Australian Capital Territory	19 August 2021	3
Ms Tammie Pribanic Deputy Under Treasurer South Australian Department of Treasury and Finance	9 November 2022	0

The Minister appointed the following members to the Council during 2022–23:

- Dr Luci Ellis*
- Mr Stephen Walters*
- Ms Gayle Milnes
- Prof Robert Breunig
- Prof Nicholas Biddle
- Ms Tammie Pribanic
- Ms Joann Wilkie
- Mr Antony Skinner*

*Re-appointment

The following members were farewelled in 2022–23, with thanks for their contributions to the Council:

- Mr Adam McKissack
- Dr Matthew Steen

Appendix 2: ASAC 2022–23 meeting agendas

3 August 2022

1. Welcome and introduction
2. Statistician's report
3. Members' reports
4. Census: 2021 Update and 2026 Early Thinking

- 5. Business Dynamism
- 6. Private Sector Datasets
- 7. Other business

15 December 2022

- 1. Welcome and introduction
- 2. Statistician's report
- 3. Members' reports
- 4. ABS Organisational Design Update
- 5. Timely Indicators
- 6. Census 2026 Topic Consultation
- 7. Other business

15 March 2023

- 1. Welcome and introduction
- 2. Statistician's report
- 3. Members' reports
- 4. Economic and Statistical Outlook for 2023
- 5. Progress with data sharing between the Commonwealth and States and Territories
- 6. Breaking Down Barriers – Melbourne Institute's Shared Data Environment for studying disadvantage in Australia
- 7. Other business

Appendix 3: Freedom of Information

In accordance with section 8 of the Freedom of Information Act 1982, details of the structure and functions of ASAC and how members of the public can obtain access to information held by the Council are outlined below.

Establishment, organisation and functions

For information regarding the establishment, organisation and function of ASAC, see Chapter 1 – About ASAC.

Powers

As an advisory body, ASAC has no decision-making or other powers directly affecting members of the public. The Council does not administer any enactments or schemes.

Arrangements for outside participation

ASAC members are appointed by the Minister responsible for the ABS to ensure a broad range of views and interests are reflected in the advice that the Council offers to the Minister and the Australian Statistician. For membership details, see Appendix 1.

Persons or bodies outside the Australian Government administration may contribute matters for the Council's consideration by making representations to the Minister or the ASAC Chairperson. Contributions can be directed in writing to the ASAC Secretariat at the address below.

Information available

The ASAC Annual Report is available on the ABS website. The ABS maintains records on behalf of ASAC relating to: the administration of the Council; papers discussed at Council meetings; summary records of meeting proceedings; and correspondence relating to the activities of the Council.

Feedback and enquiries

ASAC welcomes feedback on this report. Feedback or enquiries related to accessing ASAC documents, including enquiries under the Freedom of Information Act 1982, may be directed in writing (by post or email) to:

Secretariat

Australian Statistics Advisory Council

c/- Australian Bureau of Statistics

Locked Bag 10

Belconnen ACT 2616

Email: asac@abs.gov.au (<mailto:asac@abs.gov.au>)